

From the Clovis airfield into town, there's more farmland than there is in the whole Shortgrass Country. My purpose here is to make a speech for a young farmer's group. I'm already uncomfortable from thinking of speaking to a bunch of people that take agriculture serious. I just hope enough cow herders come to salt the audience with amateurs, or I'll be in real trouble.

Grain and hay farming like these folks do takes a lot of skill and hard work. Harrowing and planting and plowing and terracing and irrigating to salting and watering a few old cows on a mesquite flat.

About 40 years ago, I lost my appetite for combines and rowbinder riding. After my stepdad had shown me the thrills of a summer harvest or two, I was ready to dedicate my life to unbroken land.

For reorientation purposes, I've been over to the local cow auction. Two days from now, the company is holding a special stocker cow sale. I wasn't looking for any cattle. I was looking for companionship. Old boys who traffic in hollow horns are great cures for pre-show stage fright. By the time you've forced the floor in a cowman coffee session, talking at Radio City, New York isn't a challenge.

The scene looked like all sales rings. Cattle bawling through the corrals outside and hombres scurrying to the telephones and private offices inside. Only difference between the New Mexico herder and his Texas counterpart is that these are as easy to read as a college dorm poker game. It doesn't matter how much the wind and the dust weathers their faces, they can't hide a winning streak. Three of the consignors were eating triple dips of ice cream while I was in the auction's restaurant. It was still 48 hours until their checks were going to be ready at the payoff window yet a blindfolded judge at a rigged stock show could have picked them for the winners.

The leader of the group said they'd been all afternoon pairing two cows with their calves that had been separated at the ranch, not the calves that were standing in those strange corrals covered in mud and residue around swarms of people and traffic noises. I was pretty impressed that two pairs had been worked in that short a time. Coming as close as nephew to aunt in a pen of hot breaths freshly off a truck is a mighty good score. It's a shame that more of those New Mexico cowboys don't work for adoption agencies. They'd be wizards in the big cities.

Going visiting is a stimulating experience. At lunch, I told a couple of my favorite stories that never have gone over back home. These people are either more polite or don't expect the price of a dinner steak to bring on a Bob Hope act. I get plenty provoked at those deadheads in Mertzon and San Angelo for yawning and looking off right in the middle of a tale. I was glad to find some gentlemen with a sense of humor for a change. I plan to stop in Clovis often. After I see how my speech goes tonight, I might just move up here.

One thing for sure, I'd better be on my toes for the program. It hasn't been long since farmers expressed their disapproval with fresh tomatoes and unfried eggs.

Speechmaking is a competitive game. There never have been many listeners on this earth. It'll be my luck for the cowboys to be out pairing cows. At least, I'll have some new stories to bring home.

